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TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 2439  
INFO RUEHBJ/AMEMBASSY BEIJING IMMEDIATE 6488  
RUEHBY/AMEMBASSY CANBERRA IMMEDIATE 2070  
RUEHUL/AMEMBASSY SEOUL IMMEDIATE 2565  
RUEHFK/AMCONSUL FUKUOKA IMMEDIATE 0577  
RUEHNH/AMCONSUL NAHA IMMEDIATE 3033  
RUEHOK/AMCONSUL OSAKA KOBE IMMEDIATE 4104  
RUEHKSO/AMCONSUL SAPPORO IMMEDIATE 1511  
RUEHIN/AIT TAIPEI IMMEDIATE 6374  
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC IMMEDIATE  
RUALSFJ/COMUSJAPAN YOKOTA AB JA IMMEDIATE  
RUCPDOC/DEPT OF COMMERCE WASHINGTON DC IMMEDIATE  
RHHMUNA/HQ USPACOM HONOLULU HI IMMEDIATE  
RUEATRS/TREASURY DEPT WASHDC IMMEDIATE  
RHEHAAA/NSC WASHDC IMMEDIATE

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 TOKYO 001537

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TAGS: PGOV JA

SUBJECT: NO SURPRISES IN JAPAN'S ELECTIONS: GOOD NEWS FOR  
ABE AND LDP

REF: TOKYO 1521

Classified By: AMBASSADOR J. THOMAS SCHIEFFER, REASONS 1.4(B),(D).

¶1. (C) Summary. The first round of unified local elections, held on April 8, resulted in no surprises. The status quo was preserved and, overall, conservative and LDP strength was reaffirmed by the voters. This is good news for PM Abe, whose poll numbers and popularity had been flagging. Candidates supported, either formally or informally, by the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) took 11 of 13 gubernatorial races, including three of five contested by the main opposition Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ). In the key Tokyo race, incumbent Governor Ishihara easily defeated his DPJ opponent. The DPJ did pick up new seats in many of the 44 prefectoral assembly races at the expense of the ruling party, but not enough to change the political landscape. Turnout was lackluster overall, continuing a decades-long trend. Both parties, the LDP and the DPJ, have claimed "victory" in the elections, but the DPJ is still far from moving into a position to unseat the ruling coalition. End summary.

¶2. (C) Japan's voters went to the polls in the first round of the unified local elections on April 8, choosing 13 governors, four big city mayors, and thousands of prefectoral and municipal assembly members. The elections, held every four years, attracted a great deal of press attention this year in anticipation of upcoming House of Councilors elections in July. The election cycle ensures that the local elections and Upper House elections coincide only once every twelve years, and the press was keen to portray yesterday's elections as an indicator of how the nation will vote in July and if Abe's low poll numbers would translate into LDP losses.

¶3. (C) As it turned out, the April 8 elections resulted in no real surprises, as the ruling coalition faced few serious challenges from the opposition parties and no major issues emerged to galvanize swing voters. Many candidates tried to distance themselves from party affiliations to attract the large numbers of unaffiliated voters, although they continued to garner support from the parties behind the scenes. Typifying the mood, Gakushuin University professor Takeshi Sasaki was quoted in the press as saying the races "lacked

enthusiasm."

¶4. (C) The LDP can claim "victory" in 11 of 13 gubernatorial races, although many of the candidates ran as independents, with varying levels of support from the national and prefectural party organizations. All nine LDP incumbents won reelection. In the closely watched Tokyo election, 74-year-old novelist, ex-cabinet minister, and conservative commentator Shintaro Ishihara easily won his third term, besting Shiro Asano by a count of 2.8 million to 1.7 million votes. Both candidates were technically independents, but received informal support from the LDP and DPJ, respectively.

The DPJ hadn't expected to win, but had hoped to fare better, hoping to leverage a successful showing in the Tokyo campaign into greater momentum in July. Ishihara set a record in 2003, winning over three million votes, but he faced a tougher challenge this year after a series of scandals -- one involving tax dollars to purchase works by Ishihara's artist son -- hit his administration in the months leading up to the election. In response, Ishihara ran a much more muted campaign this time, apologizing on several occasions for past words and deeds. Still, exit polls show only 64 percent of his supporters in 2003 voted for him again this year, with 24 percent shifting their vote to Asano. Higher turnout this year accounts for the fact that he nonetheless received almost the same number of votes as last time. Ishihara took as much as 70 percent of the unaffiliated vote last time. This time, most polls show the two candidates split the unaffiliated vote, with Ishihara enjoying only a slight lead. Unaffiliated voters represent more than a third of all voters in Tokyo.

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¶5. (SBU) In other gubernatorial match-ups, incumbents Wataru Aso and Harumi Takahashi, running with support from the LDP, beat back DPJ candidates in Fukuoka and Hokkaido with little difficulty. On the opposition side of the ledger, DPJ Diet member Takuya Tasso, 42, won in a landslide over four other candidates, including a local LDP mayor, becoming the nation's youngest governor. He is a protege of DPJ leader Ichiro Ozawa, also an Iwate native; a Tasso loss would have reflected poorly on Ozawa. Incumbent Governors Issei Nishikawa and Akihiro Noro, jointly sponsored by the LDP and DPJ, destroyed JCP challengers in Fukui and Mie. In Tokushima, Saga, and Oita, LDP-backed governors Kamon Iizumi, Yasushi Furukawa, and Katsusada Hirose also won reelection without DPJ opponents. In two prefectures where the incumbents resigned and LDP candidates ran without DPJ opposition, Vice Governor Shinji Hirai and former LDP Upper House member Shogo Arai won in Tottori and Nara, while former Finance Ministry bureaucrat Zenbe Mizoguchi won in Shimane.

¶6. (C) Despite the poor showing in the governor races, DPJ candidates made some inroads in several prefectoral assembly contests, winning 375 of 2,544 seats, up from 230, adding a total of 63 new seats. The LDP dropped from 1,313 to 1,212 seats, a fourth consecutive loss in representation. Fortunately for the LDP, coalition junior partner Komeito kept all of its 181 seats. As a percentage, DPJ members now occupy 14.7 percent of all prefectoral assembly seats, up from 8.7 percent last time. The DPJ was also able to win at least one seat in all 44 prefectures, including six where it had failed to win any in 2003. Despite those gains, however, the DPJ holds a majority in only Iwate. The LDP maintained its majority in 19 prefectures, holds half of the seats in five others, and enjoys, with Komeito, a margin of close to four to one in the number of prefectoral seats held over the DPJ.

¶7. (C) Marking the continued decline of the left in Japanese politics, the Japan Communist Party (JCP) failed to meet its own expectations, winning only 100 seats, down sharply from a goal of 152, its largest previous total. The Social Democratic Party (SDP) took only 52 seats, down 23. A total of 583 independents also won election, comprising nearly

one-fourth of the total number of prefectoral assembly seats.

Women fared better this year, with 190 female assembly members out of a total of 367 candidates winning election, although their representation in assemblies remained the same, at just 7.5 percent. The previous record was 164 seats for female representatives. The largest number of successful female candidates, 50, came from the JCP, followed by the DPJ, with 42, and the LDP, with only 27.

¶ 8. (SBU) Turnout was slightly lower than expected. Average voter turnout in the 44 prefectoral assembly race stayed almost the same as 2003, at just over 52 percent, but 27 prefectures recorded new lows. The number of voters was up more than 10 percent in the key Tokyo gubernatorial race, to just over 55 percent, but up only slightly in other important races in Hokkaido, Kanagawa, and Iwate. The numbers were way down in the eight gubernatorial races where candidates were supported either formally or informally by the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) and where coalition partner Komeito did not face direct challenges from the main opposition Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ).

¶ 9. (C) LDP Secretary General Hidenao Nakagawa claimed three victories, one defeat, and one draw in the five contested gubernatorial races in his post-election comments to the press. Despite the fact that the Upper House elections did not appear to loom large, the LDP is expected to try to build on momentum from their victories in the head-to-head contests. The favorable "tailwind" from their win in Tokyo and the DPJ's failure to pull off any upsets should give the LDP a certain measure of confidence. DPJ Secretary General Yukio Hatoyama took responsibility for his party's defeats in Tokyo, Fukuoka, and Hokkaido, blaming the losses on delays in fielding candidates. The party didn't even bother to field or back candidates in six of the 13 gubernatorial races.

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Press reports criticized the DPJ for its failure to garner sufficient unaffiliated votes to unseat Tokyo Governor Shintaro Ishihara, even after scandals forced him to adopt an apologetic tone during the campaign. The DPJ will also need to reflect on why it continues to have problems attracting urban voters. Despite the losses, DPJ contacts have repeatedly reaffirmed to the Embassy their intention to stand by Ozawa through the July elections. Hatoyama told the press on April 9 that the DPJ had successfully "laid the groundwork" for the national campaign in July.

SCHIEFFER